Talking a walk on the wild side in panda paradise

By Kathryn Reed

CHENGDU, China – Fur against my cheek, gnawing away on his (or her?) apple, I so wanted to suddenly be able to speak panda.

For a brief moment, I was in black and white heaven as I held the 6-month-old on my lap. Thoughts of running off with it, learning to grow bamboo in Tahoe, and wondering how to contain it in my back yard filled my head.

Kathryn Reed in panda heaven in Chengdu, China.

With claws that looked like they could slice and dice me and whatever else it wanted to, I decided to let it stay in China.

The donation to hold this bundle of fur (a Christmas gift from Sue) goes to the reserve to continue research on the endangered breed and to help sustain its existence.

Although I have mixed feelings about humans holding wild animals, I know without such contributions it's likely future generations might not ever see a panda other than one that is stuffed.

For nearly 30 years, the World Wildlife Fund has been working in China to help preserve the 3.8 million acres of forest in and around the habitat of pandas. The giant panda is listed as endangered in the World Conservation Union's Red List of Threatened Animals. There are about 1,600 left in the wild. Nearly 300 live in zoos and breeding centers around the world, mostly in China. The nearest to Tahoe are in San Diego.

Pandas have been special to me ever since they first arrived in 1972 at the National Zoo in Washington, D.C. I was in grade school, living outside of the capital at the time. Every time someone would come visit, I'd ask my parents if we could take them to see the pandas.

I still have one of my stuffed pandas named after those two original ones – Ling-Ling and Hsing-Hsing. Mom made me a pantsuit with pandas. I had sheets with pandas. I insisted on visiting the current pandas when I was in D.C. a few years ago. I have panda pajamas.

Last month, I went to their homeland of China – specifically, the Chengdu Research Base of Giant Panda Breeding. This reserve opened in 1987 with less than a dozen pandas and now has 80.

The goal of this site is to study their behavior, have them reproduce and one day reintroduce them to the wild – though the latter is a future goal.

Our guide, Philip He, gave us a little history lesson as we drove to the reserve – like how the word panda did not exist in the Chinese language before the 20th century. Panda means bear cat. It was a French explorer who named this animal panda. Their habitat is in five major areas, two of them in Chengdu where we were.

Still, the panda has been a symbol of peace in China for centuries. Armies would put a panda on flags as a way to signal a day of rest from war, according to He. And it was 39

years ago they were a symbol of peace when President Richard Nixon made his groundbreaking trip to China.

Part of why their population is dwindling in the wild is that they are solitary creatures and their mating season is short.

They are big eaters – consuming about 44 pounds of bamboo a day. It could be one of 60 kinds of bamboo.

He said in the 1980s large areas of bamboo died, which led to numerous pandas dying off.

At the Chengdu breeding center about two dozen pandas are born each year. On this particular day three 6-month-olds are sleeping in a tree. Then one scrambles down, deciding mom looks bored. They tumble around in a playful manner until mom gets tired of this game and saunters off.

The 321-acre reserve is also home to red pandas – but in my world – they are just weird looking raccoons and not real pandas.

It was the 1½ year olds playing on their jungle gym of sorts that captured me. One just sat there chomping away on bamboo, oblivious to the camera shutters clicking away.

The pandas are reason enough for me to book another flight to China.

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